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# V.

## RUSSIAN NOVELS AND NOVELISTS OF THE DAY.

The Diary of a Sportsman,  
and other Novels.  
Smoke: A Novel.

Virgin Soil: A Novel.  
Childhood and Youth.  
War and Peace.

Anna Karenina: A Novel.

SINCE the time that Russia and Russian literature have ceased to be an "unknown land," and the past development and possible future of the Russian people have become an object of study and interest for European and American observers, but two Russian authors have succeeded in acquiring a world-wide fame. These are Ivan Turgenieff and Count Leo Tolstoy. In selecting them as representatives of the Russian national literature, the critical judgment of the public has been guided by a true sense of their talent, their poetic force, and national importance.

Turgenieff and Tolstoy stand undisputedly at the head of the Russian literature of fiction, and as fiction has for a long time been the only and is still the most important form of Russian literature in general, as well as one of the most powerful instruments of social progress in Russia, both novelists may be considered the chief representatives of the Russian national intellect, of its past and present aspirations and developments. As to their creative poetical genius both stand on a nearly equal level. Both are endowed with that keenness of observation, that deep instinctive knowledge of the human heart, that peculiar magnetic affinity between the poet and the nation he belongs to, which the sacred flame of genius alone confers on its elect. But they differ widely as to the character and tendency of their works—so widely indeed, that a comparison between them becomes scarcely possible. Turgenieff is above and before all the poet of Russian peasant-life, with all its pleasures and woes. The plain, monotonous existence of daily toil led by

the Russian laborer in the midst of the boundless steppe inspires our great novelist with the highest poetry, with the most touching and pathetic feeling. Even nature, which he loves so passionately and describes with such masterly art, assumes under his pen the peculiar coloring which the simple imagination of the people sheds on it. For the pictures of Russian peasant-life he has reserved his brightest colors. To the healing of the sorrows and wrongs of the peasant he has devoted all the power of his genius.

On the other hand, Count Leo Tolstoy may be called the literary representative of the higher classes of Russian society. In his works we find a true and vivid picture of the Russian *barstvo* (nobility), with all its peculiar characteristics, its poetry, its social and moral philosophy. Violently severed from the rest of the people by a premature and artificial civilization imposed on them "by order of the Czar," corrupted by the double influence of the power they exercised over their serfs and of the Czar's despotism under which they were themselves compelled to bow their heads, naturally endowed with a passionate but inconsistent and somewhat indolent disposition, the Russian nobles, or at least the most intelligent and best educated among them, had at all times a marked tendency toward a contemplative, brooding, melancholy mode of life, devoid of action and full of a barren, self-consuming skepticism, which gradually destroyed all passion and individuality of character, and, to use the language of that Danish prince who might well have passed for the forefather of the Russian *barin*, "o'ershadowed their resolutions with the pale cast of thought." Count Tolstoy is the historian, the physiologist, the poet of this peculiar type. All his works, taken as a whole, present a complete natural history of that type, but a natural history written by one who himself belongs to those whom he describes, who has felt in his own heart all the pangs of their melancholy, who himself labors under their faults and possesses their virtues. Social problems have little or no interest for him. He touches them in his novels only so far as their existence reflects in some manner on the development of his fond type. He dwells with preference on such subjects as arise out of the complicated relations of civilized life, and which require from the author the finest and most delicate psychological analysis. In this sphere of fiction he is a thorough master, an artist of astonishing creative power; but to the life of the people he is a stranger, his sympathy for its simple forms seems affected, and when he does happen to draw a picture of peasant-life it gives us the impres-

sion as if a well-educated and benevolent nobleman told us what he had seen of country-life in passing through a village in his traveling-carriage and four.

The same contrast existing in the character of their works marks also the personal appearance of each of the great Russian novelists. Turgenieff's tall, somewhat stooping figure, his long, white hair and flowing beard, his mild blue eyes and broad features, to which a good-natured smile gives a peculiarly benevolent and dreamy expression—all suggest in him one of those village patriarchs whom one occasionally meets in Russia, who have seen and thought and suffered a good deal during their long, eventful life, and who on their decline have acquired the practice, if not the theory, of that great truth, that "to understand means to forgive." Leo Tolstoy is a good deal younger than his great literary contemporary; he is now some forty-five years of age. His features are not handsome, but carry the marks of deep thought, of serious study, and of tormenting inner conflicts of the heart and mind. He is a perfect type of what the Germans call a "Grübler." In his appearance, his demeanor, his way of speaking, he betrays a man accustomed to subject each feeling, each step in life, to a subtle, searching analysis. He *is* himself what he *describes* in his novels, the "Russian Hamlet."

Of all the numerous novels Turgenieff has published, and every one of which was looked upon as an event in the literary circles of all civilized nations, it is his first work, "The Sportsman's Diary" and a few other small novels which appeared about the same period (1846-'54), for which he is especially entitled to an immortal fame. Those early works are all positive creations of his genius. Their subjects are taken from that Russian peasant-life for which Turgenieff has always shown such heartfelt sympathy, and the beauties and poetic interest of which he was the first to reveal to the European public. "The Sportsman's Diary" consists of a series of disconnected sketches, the result of observations made by a sportsman during his rambles through the woods and steppes of central Russia. This "sportsman" is in most cases undoubtedly Turgenieff himself, who spent nearly all his early youth on his family estates in the province of Orel. Each of these sketches is a perfect gem of poetry and simple dramatic force. One idea pervades them all: the desire to show to Russian society all the baseness and injustice of serfdom, all the evil influences it exercised on the naturally mild, tolerant, and eminently gifted nature of the

Russian peasant. Turgenieff, in his "Sportsman's Diary," was one of the foremost pioneers of emancipation in Russia, and this title to immortality shall never fail him as long as a human heart still beats for liberty and truth !

In one of these sketches the artist shows us an old peasant living in the midst of pathless woods all alone. He is never seen in the neighboring villages. Some hold him for a sorcerer, others for a highwayman, but nobody knows whence he came, nor what his past life has been. Lost in the woods during a terrible storm, the "sportsman" meets with that mysterious figure. While the wind is howling around and flashes of lightning illumine the dark forest, the old man tells him his dreary story—how in his youth he had had a beautiful wife, and how his master, the *barin*, fell in love with her and took her away from him. Once on a hot summer day the sportsman sees a peasant stretched nearly senseless on the roadside. He approaches him and hears that he is ill and poor and unable to do the work for his master ; everything he possesses has been sold to pay the taxes and he himself has been whipped nearly to death. "Now," he exclaims, "all is indifferent to me ! There is nothing to rob me of any more ; they can not make me more miserable than I am !"

And so in each of these sketches a vivid picture, awful in its natural simplicity, of all the horrors of slavery arises before us, adorned with the magic beauties of nature with which the miserable, down-trodden serf lives in constant communion. By far the most remarkable of these antislavery sketches is, however, the one entitled "Mumu," which, though not forming a part of the "Sportsman's Diary," belongs to the same period of Turgenieff's literary career. It is the story of a deaf and dumb peasant and his dog, to which the former is passionately attached and which he calls by the only sounds he is able to pronounce, *mu-mu* ! The bark of this dog once happens to disturb the slumbers of the mistress, the *barynia*, a nervous old maid, who gives the order to drown the beast. The poor deaf and dumb man obeys, and drowns his only friend with his own hand. This plain story, the subject of which might appear almost trivial in its simplicity, is told by Turgenieff with such a pathetic feeling and in a language so full of poetic force, that it produces on the reader a powerful and lasting impression.

There can be no doubt as to the fact that the "Sportsman's Diary," and especially "Mumu," contributed in a great measure toward

gaining the hearts of Russian society for the holy cause of emancipation. With the accomplishment of this work Turgenieff seems to have spent all he had of love and kindly feeling for his people. He ceased to draw his subjects exclusively from Russian peasant-life. The frame of his works became wider, and embraced the whole Russian society. But at the same time the faculty of creating positive types seemed to forsake him. Emerging from the sphere of the plain workingman's life, the poet perceived in all the rest of society nothing but a dark crowd of unprincipled men or of weak skeptics, incapable of any true feeling, devoid of a set purpose and guiding rule in life. For them he has nothing but gall and contempt in his heart, satire and mockery on his lips. The only being whom he exempts from this sweeping verdict is the Russian woman. She stands aloof from all the baseness of practical life—of that sham which is officially called "civilization" in Russia. Her heart is whole and sincere in its passions as in its faults, and is exalted far above the petty "Hamlets" who play the first parts among the male portion of society. For this reason woman is always the suffering party in Turgenieff's novels. She suffers or perishes by the love of a man unworthy of her, standing far below her in point of energy, honor, and courage.

This negative view of Russian society pervades all the larger and smaller novels of Turgenieff, from "Rudin" to "Fathers and Sons," and reaches its climax in "Smoke," where not one single redeeming figure is to be found. Here the novelist seems utterly to despair of his own country and of its future. "Smoke" is the literary death-knell of the aristocratic, intelligent class of Russians, such as the double influence of serfage and autocracy had shaped it. Even the women of that class find no more pity at the poet's hands: Irène, the heroine of "Smoke," is a designing adventuress who, after having once had the "honor" to attract the attention of "a very high personage" (by whom the Emperor himself is evidently meant), avails herself of the prominent position thus afforded to her for getting on in the world and forwarding her husband's administrative career. The whole upper class of Russian society is represented by Turgenieff as a set of hollow, conceited fools, or of designing, corrupted, and unprincipled *intrigants*. As a biting and merited satire on "liberal" Russia of modern days, "Smoke" has a great social importance. Appearing as it did during the decay of the aristocratic period of modern Russian history, it sums up the results of the latter, and marks at the same time the beginning of a

new national epoch, the awakening of the people itself to an independent political and social life.

Turgenieff is, however, unable to understand rightly this new feature in the intellectual development of modern Russia, as his "Bazaroff" in "Fathers and Sons," and especially his last novel, "Virgin Soil," undoubtedly prove. The uncouth, energetic representatives of "Young Russia" are utter strangers to the veteran poet. In representing them as children of that same aristocracy whom he sneers at in "Smoke," Turgenieff commits a grave error. As it often happens with the great men of literature or history, Turgenieff fails to recognize a social event which he himself has helped in bringing about; he does not perceive that the men whom he now treats as a set of turbulent, half-crazy children are but the sons of that same people whose cause he formerly espoused with so much ardor. The social importance of Turgenieff's writings in the intellectual development of Russian society has ended with "Smoke." But his fame as a poet, as a profound judge of the human heart and its passions, will never die, for it belongs to all nations, to all ages.

Count Leo Tolstoy is in this respect Turgenieff's equal, indeed, in the subtileness of his psychological analysis, perhaps even his superior. But in everything else both authors are, as we have already mentioned, the very antipodes of each other. The first of Tolstoy's works, which appeared shortly before the Crimean war, "Childhood and Youth," marked the place its author was to occupy in Russian fiction. This strange book, which can scarcely be termed "a novel," contains a full and eminently poetic account of the education, moral and intellectual development of a young Russian nobleman. The first part of it, "Childhood," is a poem of Russian domestic life, of wonderful beauty and purity. The author dwells with fond tenderness on every petty incident in the early life of his hero, Prince Nechudoff. With a masterly art and a profound knowledge of those mysterious laws by which from a series of early impressions the nature and character of man are gradually shaped, the author shows us how the idle and monotonous country life in Russia, devoid of intellectual interests, works on the mind and imagination of a naturally clever, impressible boy. Nechudoff becomes a dreamer, utterly detached from the realities of every-day life, thirsting for higher, metaphysical science. The studies in abstract philosophy which he pursues at the university with indefatigable ardor give a new direction to his morbid mind;

he becomes a skeptic, an infidel, and thence rushes headlong into the coarsest form of sensualism, into a life of dissipation and debauchery of every kind, which ultimately leads him through a series of the bitterest deceptions to—suicide.

This type of the Russian nobleman, created by Tolstoy, a type we meet with in almost every one of his novels, and his method of treating it, might lead to the conclusion that Tolstoy, as a portrayer of Russian society, is still more negative, still more disconsolate than Turgenieff. Yet it is not so. While the latter finds in the Russian aristocracy nothing but an artificial graft on the nation's body, rotten to the core, and past any attempt at regeneration, the former, on the contrary, though perfectly aware of the vices and foibles of the class he describes, seeks to revive it by an ideal born out of its own life, by a philosophy corresponding to all its peculiar characteristics.

This ideal is the family with all the feelings, duties, and pleasures it engenders, and severed, in order to preserve its entire purity, from all interests and passions of public life. This philosophy is a peculiar sort of fatalistic creed, somewhat similar to Schopenhauer's pessimism, or Hartmann's "Philosophy of the Unconscious." According to this creed, the individual is utterly powerless in the making of a nation's history. The progress of the human race is the result of elementary forces working in and by the masses, unconsciously for the latter, and the greatest wisdom on the part of the individual consists in submitting passively to these mysterious forces. To the expounding of this curious philosophy Tolstoy has devoted his most important work, "War and Peace." For its subject he has selected one of the most eventful epochs of modern Russian history—the great national struggle with Napoleon in 1812. In a series of masterly-drawn pictures he attempts to prove that all the so-called great men of the time, from Napoleon himself down to the last of the Russian generals, were nullities in themselves, and acquired their importance only from the fact of being blind instruments of a mysterious Something which pushed them forward. It must be confessed that this somewhat childish philosophy often produces on the reader an almost ludicrous impression, reminding him of the well-known French adage, "*Il n'y a pas de grand homme pour son valet de chambre !*"

An illustration of Tolstoy's ideal of family life, which he but slightly touches in "War and Peace," we find in his last novel,



finished a year ago, "Anna Karenina." As a true and artistic picture of "high life" this novel is a masterpiece without an equal, perhaps, in any literature. In one frame the author has combined two love-stories—the one pure and quiet, the other passionate and criminal. The latter, the love between the heroine, Anna, and the brilliant aide-de-camp, Prince Vronsky, is conducted by Tolstoy step by step to its tragical end with a pitiless logic, and a profound knowledge of all the subtle instincts of the human heart, of all the innumerable prejudices and peculiarities of Russian aristocratic life. The scene of the heroine's suicide, which she commits by throwing herself under the wheels of a railway-train, is in its tragical grandeur one of the most remarkable dramatic effects in modern literature. Beside these two rebel hearts, who seek their own way to love and happiness in open defiance of the decrees of society, the author has placed another pair—the plain, unsophisticated country gentleman Levin and the young girl who ultimately becomes his wife. Their romance, disturbed for a moment by the interference of the disorderly element in the person of Vronsky, flows on quietly and peacefully. The young Mrs. Levin becomes an utterly prosaic and even somewhat slovenly *materfamilias*; her husband remains what he always had been, a quiet country gentleman, ignoring entirely all manner of social "problems" or political "questions," raising his corn and potatoes with the persistency, if not with the civic courage, of a Cincinnatus. And at the close of the book we seem to hear the author exclaiming, "Go and do likewise!"

Such is the moral and social creed of this great poet of Russian aristocracy. The reader will not be slow in detecting all its shallowness. An author who says to the class he represents: "You are estranged from the rest of the people—you are by nature lazy and indolent, that is true, but no matter; be still more indolent, retire once for all from public life, bury yourselves in your families, on your estates, and you shall be saved!"—such an author is unconsciously writing a bitterer satire on that class than any of its most implacable enemies could have done.

Thus the two greatest novelists of modern Russia, both born and bred in that class of Russian society which has until now held undisputed the scepter of intellectual and political power—both, the one with a set purpose, the other unconsciously, pass a death-warrant against the present social organization of their country.

In their works, as in a mirror, the actual condition of Russian society is reflected with a merciless accuracy. They are not only the poets, they are the physiologists, the historians, of their people, and, by the powerful influence they exert on the public mind, they may yet prove to be, in defiance of the proverb, "prophets in their own land!"

S. E. SHEVITCH.